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BOISE, Idaho — While some 30 members of the Boise Kiwanis Club wolfed down stacks of pancakes, Frank Church, Idaho's senior Senator, talked about the nation's energy problems and his efforts to gain Government funds for the state's small, growing gasohol industry.

But it soon became apparent that his audience at the breakfast session wanted to talk about foreign policy. He was asked why the hostage crisis in Iran had not been resolved, why the American military had failed in its effort to rescue the hostages, why Washington had not stopped Moscow from moving troops into Afghanistan, and why Mr. Church, as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, did not seem able to do anything about these problems.

The meeting was only one of many campaign appearances Mr. Church, a Democrat, has made in his drive to be re-elected next November for a fifth term. But he and his aides say the session was typical of his encounters with Idaho voters these days.

'Appeasement' Raised as Issue

Like his liberal colleagues in other states, Mr. Church faces an electorate that is worried about America's apparent inability to protect its interests around the world and seems increasingly inclined to blame foreign policy "doves," such as Mr. Church.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Church's critics in Idaho, including his Republican opponent, Representative Steven D. Symms, have been quick to capitalize on this. In speeches and political advertisements, Mr. Symms cites Mr. Church's support for the Panama Canal treaties, the new strategic arms accord with Moscow and the Carter Administration's cancellation of the B-1 bomber to argue that the 55-year-old Senator has been a leading force for "unilateral disarmament" and "appeasement."

Mr. Symms has been aided in this effort by a local political lobby group that calls itself Anyone But Church. The group is financed by the Virginia-based National Conservative Political Action Committee, which is spending \$1 million this year in an effort to knock several prominent Democratic liberals out of the Senate, including Alan Cranston of California, John C. Culver of Iowa and George McGovern of South Dakota.

As a result Mr. Church is facing his toughest political battle since he was elected to the Senate 23 years ago.

"If you are asking whether I can win this election on foreign policy issues, the answer is probably no," Mr. Church said in an interview in his Boise office. "There is a general feeling that things aren't going well abroad and we can't do anything about it."

"The natural reaction is that our problems must have something to do with military weakness," he added. "I don't believe that, but this is the current that is

running here like everywhere else."

Mr. Church's reputation as a leading foreign policy liberal has created political problems for him before, particularly in the Vietnam War, when his opposition to American military involvement in Southeast Asia emerged as a major issue in his 1968 race. But Mr. Church believes that his early opposition to the war gradually became a political asset as even conservative Idahoans grew disillusioned with President Johnson's policies.

If Mr. Church was a maverick in foreign policy in the 1960's, this was not the case in the last decade, in which a group of liberal Democrats and moderate Republicans was successful in pushing through legislation, such as the 1973 War Powers Resolution, meant to limit a President's prerogatives to wage war.

Mr. Church emerged as a dominant figure in Senate foreign policy circles, sponsoring amendments in the early 1970's that ended the American bombing of Laos and Cambodia and heading a select committee that in 1975 investigated abuses by the Central Intelligence Agency, among other activities.

Active Role for Panel

In 1978 Mr. Church became chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, declaring that he was determined to return the panel to a position of influence. In the last two years the committee has played a more active role, with Mr. Church making sure that it provided strong backing for the Carter Administration's Panama

treaties and efforts to conclude new arms control agreements with Moscow.

In the process, however, Mr. Church has become a target for Mr. Symms and other conservatives in Idaho. "Our foreign policy was never more chaotic than when Frank Church became chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee," Mr. Symms said.

In part, the Church campaign is dealing with this criticism by depicting Mr. Symms as an extremist.

But as his campaign slogan of "Idaho never had a better friend" makes clear, Mr. Church's main strategy is to emphasize local issues in the campaign and to remind voters that, as a ranking Democrat in the Senate, he is well-situated to get help for his state.

For the time being, Iran and Afghanistan seem to have overshadowed local issues in the campaign, leading some local politicians to contend that if Mr. Church is to win next November he will have to adopt a more hawkish stance on foreign policy. His critics suggest that he has already begun to do this, contending that his strong denunciation last fall of Moscow's stationing of combat troops in Cuba was designed to aid his re-election.

Mr. Church called this assertion a "bum rap," adding that he had long opposed Soviet political and military moves in Cuba and around the Caribbean.

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The New York Times

Senator Frank Church of Idaho campaigning recently in Boise

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